

HI-FI CHOICE

www.hifichoice.co.uk

Date Printed: 16 June 2005

Rega R9



Rega's most ambitious speaker to date, the R9 is crammed with interesting ideas

Rega has been a champion of affordable 'real' hi-fi for more than thirty years, starting out initially with turntables, but subsequently adding speakers, amplifiers and other electronics, all adding up to what is now a complete system component line-up.

Rega's loudspeaker designs actually go back to the company's very earliest days, though the real activity began in the 1980s with the introduction of the ELA. This was an unusual design in that it featured a small 130mm main driver loaded by a full-length transmission line, but it was also very influential as one of the first examples of the compact floorstander, a genre which has subsequently gone on to become such an important part of the marketplace.

Rega likes simplicity, and the majority of its loudspeakers have been simple two-way designs, though the mid-1990s did see a large two-and-a-half-way called the EXL, and this earlier model might well be seen as a distant ancestor of this new R9. But the R9 is really a clean slate affair, with several original and probably unique features.

It's by no means inexpensive, but you do get plenty for your money. It's certainly a stylish speaker, beautifully finished in good quality real-wood veneer, though in typical Rega fashion the style is distinctively different from the norm. The front view is exceptionally slim, the more so because sections of the hardwood front edges have been scalloped away, while it's also unusually deep by way of compensation. Front-to-back stability is therefore inherently excellent, while Rega has fitted neat cast-alloy outriggers to improve the lateral stability and also provide a genuinely secure foundation for the spikes. An unusual fabric grille is held in place magnetically, and covers most of a decorative black Perspex strip which in turn covers the mounting hardware for the three front-facing drivers, and whose shape is echoed in a large badge down at the foot.

The R9 is an interesting combination of simplicity and complexity. It has four drive units, which doesn't sound particularly simple, but these are

actually configured as a 'two-and-two-halves-way' - the bass-only driver operating alongside the bass/mid driver, while the smaller of the two tweeters comes in 'on top' of the larger one. The only true crossover network here is that between the bass/mid driver and the larger tweeter, at around 3kHz.

To keep the front view slim, the 200mm frame bass driver is mounted on the side, and the speakers are mirror imaged so you can choose to point the bass unit in or outwards. The driver has been specifically engineered so as to avoid the need for additional crossover components - by using an eight-layer high-inductance voice coil, a natural roll-off occurs above 400Hz. The bass driver is loaded by a folded quarter-wave transmission line, tuned to 45-50Hz and terminating quite high up the back panel. Great attention has been paid to smoothing the flow of air in this line, even to the extent of mounting the crossover network externally and using flat internal cables bonded to the enclosure.

Above the line exit is a small port, indicating that there's a small port-loaded sub-enclosure behind the small (130mm) bass/mid driver - a paper-cone device similar to that used in the ELA, for example - that sits at the top of the speaker. The horizontal internal partition further stiffens the sides.

Keeping the internal airflow clean might be one reason for the external crossover, but removing it from the internal vibrations and pressure changes is also a bonus. And Rega has gone one step further by incorporating no fewer than seven terminals. Two pairs merely provide the usual bi-wire/amp wiring option; the other three, by means of a supplied jump lead, are used to make a small attenuation in the bass output, to assist in getting a good room match.

The twin tweeters are mounted underneath the bass/mid driver, with the main 27mm soft fabric dome situated just below seated ear level. The smaller 19mm unit is immediately below that, its main purpose being to improve the all-round distribution of the highest frequencies.

SOUND QUALITY

The R9 is by no means your typical speaker, sonically speaking, but it's a very interesting one, succeeding more through subtlety and restraint than assertiveness and drama.

The first step was to connect them up to a system consisting of Naim CDS-3 CD player, NAC 552 preamp and NAP 500 power amp, plus Burmester 001 CD player, Magnum Dynalab MD102 tuner and a Linn/Rega hybrid record player. Connecting cables and supports were a mixture of kit from Vertex AQ, The Chord Company, Naim and Mana.

The R9 followed the Audio Note AN-E into the listening room, and although these two models are not dissimilar in price or size, the contrast in terms of both style and sound quality is nothing short of dramatic. In some ways, there are similarities with B&O's Beolab 5 (reviewed in HFC 244). Although the two models are dissimilar in a great many respects, both share a beautifully laid-back neutrality across the broad midband that is always remarkably easy on the ears, with perspectives that always sound natural and unforced.

Another element that these two designs have in common is that both companies have identified bass frequency room interaction as a key problem area. Each has gone to some lengths, in very different ways, to try and minimise the unevenness that normally results, though it has to be said that neither has been entirely successful in this regard. We spent a considerable amount of time moving the R9s around from one location to another, but never really managed to achieve a truly smooth and even bottom end in the 4.3x2.6x5.5m room used for this test, though it's impossible to say how different things would be in another room. Bass/room interaction is a very complex issue, especially when the speaker concerned has, as here, four different bass sources (two drivers, one port and the transmission line exit) with various geometric and phase relationships to one another. Under our conditions, best results were obtained with the bass level set high, the speakers sited well clear of walls, and the bass-only drivers pointing inwards.

Apart from that unevenness - which is neither unusual nor particularly serious - the bass here is terrific. It's exceptionally clean, fast and agile, has a notably wide dynamic range, and the quantity is expertly judged to give the right amount of weight, without ever becoming unpleasantly thick and heavy. Perhaps a little more drive and punch might be welcome, but the ability to convey subtle tonal and instrumental distinctions is always a delight. An album like Massive Attack's Mezzanine has a dense and complex bottom end, yet no other speaker we've come across has done a better job of sorting out the interwoven strands and tonal variations. The slight adjustment in relative bass level available via the crossover network proved most effective in compensating for room boundary reinforcement.

Although there is some coloration - voices are slightly thickened and do possess a little nasality - it's not the usual boxiness. Indeed, freedom from any significant boxiness is one of the R9's major strengths. The speakers themselves seem to 'disappear' acoustically, so that a beautifully natural and precisely focused image spreads out between and behind them. Partly because the top end is strong and assertive, it doesn't sound all that sweet, but fine detail is very clear and explicit.

Its other major strength is superb overall coherence, matching the capabilities of a regular two-way design, but adding the extra weight and openness of a multi-way without compromise. One might wish that the R9 had a little more vim, vigour and authority, but the secret of its success lies in superior delicacy, neutrality and subtlety, alongside an exceptionally wide dynamic range.

FEATURES

KEY FEATURES: Size (WxHxD): 17x103x39cm, weight: 19kg, unusual 'two-and-two-halves-way' design, 200mm side-mounted bass driver, 130mm bass/mid unit, 27mm fabric tweeter plus additional 19mm unit, sensitivity/impedance: 87dB/8 ohms

© Future Publishing.

Reproduction in whole or in part without express written permission from Future Publishing is prohibited. This material is for personal use only. All rights reserved.

Hi-Fi Choice, Future Publishing Ltd., 30 Monmouth Street, BATH, BA1 2BW.
hifichoice@futurenet.co.uk Tel: +44 1225 442244 Fax: +44 1225 732248